



April 24, 2002

Mr. George D. Cato
Deputy General Counsel
Texas Department of Health
1100 West 49th Street
Austin, Texas 78756-3199

OR2002-2086

Dear Mr. Cato:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 161888.

The Texas Department of Health (the "department") received a request for six categories of information related to an "accident on April 4, 1998 involving [a named individual] that required emergency medical services at the Worsham Steel Company facility" in El Paso, Texas. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

You acknowledge that the department failed to comply with section 552.301(b) of the Government Code in asking for this decision. Section 552.301 prescribes procedures that a governmental body must follow in asking this office to decide whether requested information is excepted from public disclosure. Section 552.301(b) provides that "[t]he governmental body must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply . . . not later than the 10th business day after the date of receiving the written request [for information]." Gov't Code § 552.301(b). It appears from the documents submitted to this office that the department received the request for information on January 31, 2002. You did not request a decision from this office until February 21, 2002. Consequently, you failed to request a decision within the ten business day period mandated by section 552.301(a) of the Government Code.

Pursuant to section 552.302 of the Government Code, a governmental body's failure to comply with section 552.301 results in the legal presumption that the requested information is public and must be released unless the governmental body demonstrates a compelling reason to withhold the information from disclosure. *See* Gov't Code § 552.302; *Hancock v. State Bd. of Ins.*, 797 S.W.2d 379, 381-82 (Tex. App.--Austin 1990, no writ)

(governmental body must make compelling demonstration to overcome presumption of openness pursuant to statutory predecessor to Gov't Code § 552.302); Open Records Decision No. 319 (1982). You argue that the submitted information is excepted under section 552.101 of the Government Code. As section 552.101 provides a compelling reason to overcome the presumption of openness, we will address your arguments under that exception. See Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977) (presumption of openness overcome by a showing that the information is made confidential by another source of law or affects third party interests).

Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. Section 773.0612(a) of the Health and Safety Code provides that the department "is entitled to access to records and other documents maintained by a person that are directly related to patient care or to emergency medical services personnel to the extent necessary to enforce this chapter and the rules adopted under this chapter." Section 773.0612(b) of the Health and Safety Code provides that "[a] report, record, or working paper used or developed in an investigation under this section is confidential and may be used only for purposes consistent with the rules adopted by the board." You state that all the submitted documents were used or developed in an investigation under section 773.0612 of the Health and Safety Code. Based on your representation, we conclude that all of the submitted records are confidential under section 773.0612(b) and must be withheld from disclosure.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental

body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Cindy Nettles
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

CN/seg

Ref: ID# 161888

Enc. Submitted documents

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(w/o enclosures)